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DDI-772-73

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19 March 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Some Reflections on the Intelligence Perspective

1. Intelligence people view foreign affairs from a particular perspective. It is not their exclusive property--lots of other analysts use this perspective too. What is distinguishing about the intelligence analyst is that he uses it so heavily. Indeed, he lives by it.

2. The perspective is that of the other fellow, the foreign actor involved in the situation being studied. The good intelligence analyst sees his job as putting himself into the position of foreigners. He tries to think his way into their minds. He seeks to perceive their problems as they perceive them, to understand their ambitions and fears and hopes and obsessions as his subjects experience them. He thinks this way is the best way of interpreting and predicting their acts. God knows he often fails, but he knows no better way.

3. Now these foreign gentlemen naturally perceive their own ambitions to be quite justified. Furthermore, being leaders, they see themselves as beset with problems and pressures, in many cases emanating from foreign governments like the USG. The view from inside Brezhnev's head--or Sadat's, or Pompidou's--turns out to be not at all the same as that from inside an American head. All this gives a distinctive cast to intelligence analysis.

4. The same phenomenon, writ larger, occurs in US embassies. Diplomats abroad take it as part of their job to convey the local perspective back to Washington. They are under additional, reinforcing pressures as well. They want to "succeed," that is, to improve bad US relations with the host country or to preserve good ones. "Failure" might hurt their

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careers; it will certainly make their life on post more difficult and even disagreeable. These pressures can bend their reporting to the point of discrediting it; they become known, and ridiculed, in Washington as mouthpieces of their host government.

5. The intelligence analyst is better off. He sits in Washington, where the picture is bigger. He has nothing at stake personally. But he does believe that he has a lot at stake professionally. He considers that if his policy-makers don't understand foreign leaders' perceptions of the situation, he's failed. He doesn't ask that US decisions should cater to these perceptions, merely that decisions should be taken in full awareness of them. That's his contribution, and he feels compelled to make it. Otherwise, what's he there for?

6. Here is some of the trouble he gets into:

--why do you keep on reporting negative things about Thieu? (because his perception of his political necessities will lead him to do things that make it important for you, the policy-maker who is backing him, to do so with your eyes open. Furthermore, there are some weaknesses in his position, and you'd best know about them sooner or later.)

--why do you keep harping on US strategic programs as being responsible for Soviet programs? (because that's a big part of the perception of those doing the deciding in Moscow.)

--why are you always excusing the anti-American acts of so-called friendly leaders? (I'm not; I'm merely pointing out that, in their perception, these acts make good local political sense--maybe are even necessary for their political survival.)

--who's interested in the "aspirations" of those murderous Black September thugs? (you should be; the more you understand them, the better your chances of separating them from their sources of support.)

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7. The difficulty is that intelligence analysts, like embassies, sometimes have trouble expressing foreign perceptions without ending up sounding sympathetic to them. Having stepped into the other fellow's shoes in order to think, they seem not to have stepped all the way out before starting to write. Their prose in these cases is uncongenial to those who are concentrating on the same situation from the standpoint of how to advance US interests. More than uncongenial, it's often fair game. Worse yet, the intelligence analyst must sometimes admit that the implications for US policy are not much affected by the foreign perceptions he has labored to analyze. Nevertheless, he tells himself, a round analysis is better than a flat one, even if they come out at the same place.

8. Obviously, the intelligence analyst ought to be careful of his prose, not generating any more flak than he has to. He should not turn off his readers by writing in the manner of an embassy which has been taken into camp. But he ought not to be so careful as to bury his contribution altogether. There are plenty of other people around town concentrating on US interests. His perspective will often make him unpopular, but it's why he's there.

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Deputy Director of Current Intelligence

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